

From Speculation to Salvation

The Trinitarian Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx

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In Dutch modern theology, the doctrine of the Trinity has played an ambivalent part. On the one hand its treatment served as a litmus test for measuring the orthodoxy of theological systems. But on the other hand, it has been largely ignored by the country's most influential theologians.¹ Even in theologies influenced by Karl Barth, for example in the work of Hendrikus Berkhof, the doctrine of the Trinity is conspicuously absent. In twentieth century Dutch theology, the most elaborate Trinitarian explorations are performed by the Jesuit theologian Piet Schoonenberg. His reflections on the priority of the pre-existent, pre-incarnate, immanent Trinity, are the result of his attempt to advocate a close relationship between a Word-Christology and a Spirit-Christology. And it is especially the latter that according to him deserves more attention in the future of theology. Not only, he writes, because the role of the Spirit has been underrated, but also because it is through Pneumatology that Christology and Soteriology can be connected.

It might surprise some that it was the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx who argued that any Christology and Soteriology should acknowledge a necessary place for the doctrine of the Trinity, although that necessity is stated by him with great caution and some reluctance. Contrary to Schoonenberg, Schillebeeckx sees a certain danger in stressing the priority of the immanent Trinity. According to him, Trinitarian theologies are often exclusively theocentric, while they should be Christocentric. His concern is with Soteriology rather than with Pneumatology.

In this paper, I would like to offer a reconstruction of Schillebeeckx' Trinitarian theology in three stages of his work. It will show that the doctrine of the Trinity has played a fundamental role in some of the so called liberal theologies like Schillebeeckx's. Furthermore, it will clarify why the complex relationship of revelation and experience in Schillebeeckx' metaphysics and hermeneutics according to himself needs a personalist and soteriological foundation, expressed and systematized in a doctrine of the Trinity.

¹ G. van den Brink/S. van Erp, 'Ignoring God Triune? The Doctrine of the Trinity in Dutch Theology', in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11(2009), 72-90.

1. Early works (1950-1970): Trinitarian theology as speculative theology

In his early works, Schillebeeckx makes a case for Trinitarian theology as fundamental theology. In the collection of articles *Revelation and Theology*, after a sketch of the history of theological method, he distinguishes between two functions of theology: a positive and a speculative one. He defines *positive theology* as seeking insight in the developments of revelation in Holy Scripture and the mystery of Christ into dogmatic theology.² According to him, a necessary condition to understand these developments is the reconstruction of historical experiences of salvation and the communal, ecclesial life that it shaped. This reconstruction however makes use of reason that is illuminated by faith and allied with the history of faith. But, he continues, neither the light of reason nor the historical continuity can be mediated by magisterial teaching alone, but should be performed and continuously renewed by speculative theology.

Speculative theology continues to intellectually regenerate the connection of present day experiences with Scripture and tradition. Apart from furthering the knowledge of faith through a reflection on the cohesion of the mysteries of faith and through the reconstruction of historical theological developments, speculative theology could also rethink positive statements discursively. But it should at the same time not overstate its demand of intelligibility. He concludes a chapter on speculative theology as follows:

The attention of theology should be focused on the present mystery of salvation, not on the human means that help us to approach it. (...) In the content of faith there is both a tendency to incarnation in the human intellect and a fundamental resistance against every rationalisation. On the one hand, theology should not slip into a so called evangelism, which has only attention for the mystery and the absurdity of faith. On the other hand, it should not move toward an uncontrolled incarnation, which has only attention for the meaningful intelligibility of faith. (...) A whole theology can therefore only prosper in a diffident advance between this Scylla and Charybdis; it lies in a constant, actively maintained tension between incarnation and de-incarnation, between transcendence and humanisation.

It is this active tension, performed by speculative theology, between incarnation and de-incarnation that is both a warning and a challenge for Trinitarian theology. A warning against Speculative theology however not only serves as a methodological framework for Trinitarian

² Schillebeeckx, *Openbaring en theologie*, [Theologische peilingen, deel 1], Baarn 1964, 84-117, 85.

theology. Schillebeeckx also argues for a Trinitarian foundation of theology, which will point all theological speculation to its Christocentric focus, because according to him, speculative theology is methodically Christocentric, although its object is theocentric. And he thinks a well-balanced Trinitarian theology is needed to safeguard theology against an exclusive focus on either divine or human immanentism.

A theology of revelation therefore should be concerned with an 'oikonomia as revelation of a theologia'. The core of a theology of revelation is a salvific mystery in history as the appearance of the eternal Trinitarian mystery of God. A theology that is exclusively concerned with the history of salvation – a criticism sometimes addressed to Schillebeeckx himself – is neglecting the mystery of revelation. As a Thomist thinker, Schillebeeckx confirms that theology's subject is everything *sub ratione Dei*, but only in as far it is revealed in Christ. Theology however, according to Schillebeeckx, at the same time confirms God as transcending the history of salvation and leading an independent intertrinitarian life, which theology can only affirm through the history of salvation. So for Schillebeeckx, although theology is always centred on the study of the economy of salvation, speaking theologically of God as God should not be identified with Soteriology. Furthermore, a theology of the Trinity will safeguard this, in as far as the doctrine is not itself treated in a theocentric manner.

Against Yves Congar, who described academic theology as necessarily theocentric and the life of faith Christocentric, Schillebeeckx argued that the structure of revelation itself determines whether theology and the life of faith are to be considered theo- or Christocentric, and he hastens to add that they are both, and that a clear distinction between the two based on the distinction between God and Christ would be devastating for the concept of revelation, if only for the critical task theology has towards the life of faith and its orientation. If theology indeed were differently oriented than faith, it would fail to critically perform this task.

It is here, that Schillebeeckx explicitly applies the doctrine of the Trinity in his fundamental theology to safeguard the two foundations of revelation, which he describes as '*manifestatio Dei in Christo*': the Trinity offers the right equilibrium of a theocentric theology and a soteriological and therefore Christological orientation. With reference to Athanasius (*De synodis* 51), he shows that the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father is motivated by the doctrines of redemption and sanctification.

2. The Christology (1970-1980): Trinitarian theology as an integral part of Soteriology

In *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, Schillebeeckx states that ‘Jesus’ life, his cross and resurrection in-the-power-of-the-Spirit reveal the depth of the Father-Son relationship, and indeed raise the problem of the Trinitarian God’.³ Therefore, according to Schillebeeckx, on the one hand the Christological problem of Jesus’ relationship with God the Father, raises Trinitarian questions, while on the other hand and consistent with the insights of his early work, he claims that Trinitarian language should always start from Christological concerns. But in the two first volumes of his Christology, Schillebeeckx stresses the historical starting point more than before: ‘we should not interpret Jesus with the Trinity as our starting point, but vice versa: only if we start with Jesus is God’s unity in its fullness (not so much a *unitas trinitatis* but a *trinitas unitatis*) to some extent accessible to us. Only in the light of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection we have knowledge of the Trinity as the divine mode of God’s perfect unity of being. Only on the basis of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his *Abba*-experience – source and soul of his message, ministry and death – and his resurrection, is it possible to say anything meaningful about Father, Son and Spirit.’⁴

For Schillebeeckx, this Christological starting point is not as much based on a theological approach as it is on a historical one, because he claims that in early Christianity the ‘post-biblical’ doctrine of the Trinity only served to explicate the mystery of the Christ, in particular His turning toward God being preceded by God turning to Him. Schillebeeckx continues: ‘(...) early Christian tradition calls this self-communication of the Father – which is the ground and source of Jesus’ unique *Abba*-experience – ‘the Word’. This implies that the Word of God is the undergirding ground of the whole Jesus phenomenon.’⁵ So, within the framework of historical-critical hermeneutics, with its stress on the historicity of revelation and experience, the interpersonal relationship between the Father and the Son is discovered as fundamental starting point for theological reasoning.

For critics of Schillebeeckx’ theology, claiming that he develops a natural theology grounded on experience or reason alone, this Trinitarian starting point of his Christology is important to take into account, because it entails that Schillebeeckx’ *Deus humanissimum*, the God with a human face Who is concerned with humanity and engaging with human history and experience, is only known by the triune and personal divine revelation in Christ.

³ E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 641.

⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 658.

⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 658.

Despite this ‘preceding’ of the Son’s turning to the Father by the Father’s turning to the Son, Schillebeeckx stresses that any distinction between an immanent and economic Trinity is meaningless. Instead of thinking the Trinity as three persons, he claims, it is only through the personhood of Jesus that we can refer to the Father and the Holy Spirit in an analogous way as persons. Thus, only ‘Jesus reveals to us “three persons” in God: Father, Jesus Christ, *Pneuma*’.⁶ In short: Jesus’ humanity reveals God as triune and only through his humanity divine revelation can be understood as triune. This is not sheer anthropomorphism, Schillebeeckx argues. Jesus’ humanity is the ground for our understanding of God, yet it does not constitute God but it confirms the fullness of God’s personal, absolute unity of being. To be sure, Schillebeeckx denies Jesus’ *anhypostasis*: ‘this man, Jesus, within the human confines of a being, is identically the Son, that is, the ‘Second Person’ of the Trinitarian plenitude of divine unity, ‘the Second Person’ coming to human self-consciousness and shared humanity in Jesus’.⁷

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 660.

⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, p. 667.

3. Later works (1980-): Trinitarian theology as an integral part of Pneumatology and Eschatology.

In his last collection of essays entitled *Theologisch Testament (Theological Last Will)*, Schillebeeckx returns more positively and explicitly to the Trinity in a dense but focused chapter on 'The Mystery of God'. The second part of that chapter is completely dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity, although it is significantly subtitled 'A Diffident Confession'. He starts with saying that he is very reluctant to reflect on the concept of 'three' in triune, especially in connection with the idea of personhood. Yet, Schillebeeckx does acknowledge a close relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ, who 'with his resurrection passes us the Spirit as eschatological gift, as a gift from the Father and Himself'.⁸ For the later Schillebeeckx, the doctrine of the Trinity should not be treated as a separate doctrine, but always as an integral part of the doctrines of Creation, Christ, Salvation and of Eschatology. The mentioning of several doctrines instead of Soteriology alone, shows a shift in his theology from Soteriology to a mystical theology, from salvific to mystical experiences, which he considers fundamental and integral to faith. So, at the end of his career, Schillebeeckx once more speaks explicitly about the Trinity, although he still does not treat it as a separate doctrine, but considers it integral to all dogmatic theology.

Schillebeeckx insists that one should not talk about three persons in God, but about the triune character of the divine nature. The doctrine of the Trinity serves mainly to understand that divine nature as being personal: 'The Trinity is the specific mode of God's personalist nature.'⁹ The unspeakable nature of God as a person is revealed by God Himself in, as Schillebeeckx puts it, 'God's eschatological revelation in Jesus, experienced by people, interpreted and testified as the Christ, Son of God. Only since the life of Jesus of Nazareth and only since the recognition of Him as the messianic Son of God, believers have knowledge of the triune structure of God.'

To conclude and in short, Schillebeeckx's doctrine of the Trinity is Christocentric, because he argues that only through Christ's salvific work it has become clear what God's personhood means for us. His concept of the divine hypostatic nature is relational, yet not intrarelatational. In short, Schillebeeckx's doctrine of the Trinity reflects God's personhood in a non-

⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, *Theologisch Testament. Notarieel nog niet verleden* (Baarn: H. Nelissen, 1994), p. 96.

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Theological Testament*, p. 96. Part of this book has been translated under the title *I am a Happy Theologian* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994).

modalistic, but ternary personalist way. Meanwhile, his language is dense, his formulations are very cautious and 'diffident'. It is questionable whether he retains some substantial notion of the immanent Trinity. In any case, the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity as doctrine is first of all a huge problem is not structurally overcome. All in all, Schillebeeckx's attitude towards the doctrine remains ambivalent.